



Brian McClinton

# Pi in the Sky

CAN a work of fiction make you believe in God? Of course not, I hear you cry. From a rational perspective, it's a very silly question. How could fiction prove or disprove a matter of fact? And anyway aren't all religions themselves fictions, just like novels? Yet President Obama no less was so convinced by Canadian author Yann Martell's 2001 novel *Life of*

*Pi* that he wrote him a short letter of thanks: "It is a lovely book – an elegant proof of God, and the power of storytelling". That's a huge claim indeed. We can now examine it more closely as the 2002 Man Booker Prize winner has been turned into a film by the Taiwanese director Ang Lee, whose previous work includes *The Ice Storm*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Brokeback Mountain*.

The fanciful claim is actually flagged at the beginning of the work by the eponymous hero Pi Patel who, now a middle-aged man living in Canada, tells a struggling novelist searching for material that the story of his life will make his listener believe in God. We might question the wisdom of laying your deck of theological cards on the table so soon. If anything, it is likely to make us less willing to suspend disbelief. Being told what we will believe in advance is positively inviting a sceptical counter-reaction.

Propaganda or didactic art succeeds best when we are totally unaware of it. I was brought up in the 1950s on a diet of TV and matinee westerns, and in the woods near my grandfather's house we regularly played Cowboys and Indians. The Indians were always the baddies, for that is how they were presented in Hollywood. There was an occasional good Indian, like Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*, but generally they were savage and cruel. Then at the beginning of the 1970s I saw *Soldier Blue*, which focused on the 1864 Sand Creek massacre of Cheyenne in Colorado. It was a manipulative film, but it worked. I left the cinema that night, very angry that I had been duped for so long into a one-sided white man's view of American history.

Westerns succeeded in their propaganda in no small part because most of them posed as harmless fun which should not be taken too seriously. *Life of Pi* wants to be enjoyable but it also openly seeks to communicate a message or – in Obama's more definite verdict – a proof. It should therefore be judged on its own terms, both as a work of entertainment and as a theological thesis.

The first part of *Life of Pi* is a charming and whimsical portrayal of the early life of Piscine Molitor Patel, named after the famous art deco swimming pool in Paris. He lives in the former French enclave of Pondicherry (now called Puducherry), where his father keeps a zoo in the local botanical gardens. At school his classmates tease him about his 'pissing', so he shortens his name to the mathematical constant and wins them round by writing the first



10,000 digits of its decimal representation on 5 blackboards in the Maths class.

Pi is a spiritually precocious child who, although brought up in a Hindu culture which has introduced him to many gods, wants to know more. He stumbles on Christianity in a hilltop church and is taken by the loving message of Jesus, though he rejects the Atonement, thinking the

idea that Christ is punished by God for the sins of the guilty is nonsense. Later, he also delves into Islam and finds it a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion.

Pi decides to adopt a syncretic mixture of all three, believing that "Faith is a house with many rooms". But his father is not impressed, telling him that "believing in everything is the same as believing in nothing". He advises his son to use reason and common sense, but Pi sticks to his pluralist pathway: "Bapu Gandhi said 'all religions are true'. I just want to love God". Clearly, we too are meant to see that all religions are, at heart, the same because they seek an ultimate spiritual reality which will enable us to live better lives. In other words, both mystically and morally, they are different paths to the same ultimate truths.

Pi's position does seem similar to that of Gandhi, who envisioned the world's religions as individual branches of the same tree. Another illustration of what the philosopher John Hick calls the 'pluralistic hypothesis' is the ancient Indian parable of three blind men touching an elephant. The first blind man is holding the elephant's leg. He says, "I think an elephant is like the trunk of a great tree". The second blind man disagrees. While holding the elephant's trunk he says, "I believe an elephant is like a large snake". The third blind man believes they are both wrong. "An elephant is like a great wall", he exclaims as he touches the elephant's side. Each blind man is convinced he is right and others are wrong without realising they are all touching the same elephant. The major religions of the world are like the three blind men, each in contact with the same 'elephant' without knowing it.

Yet is this actually true? Are all religions essentially the same? A difference between the parable and world religions is that in the latter case there is no elephant in the room. Even the man with 20/20 vision can't see it. No one has direct access to the ultimate reality, so no one has any hard evidence that it even exists. Unlike elephants, the 'Real' may be a mere figment of the imagination and as such we can make it whatever we wish. Hence Gandhi was able to include atheists in his schemata because they seek the truth and "truth is god". He could even include animals: "God, ourselves and all objects in the universe are in essence one reality". This pantheistic affirmation seems also to be relevant to *Life of Pi*, where even a Bengal tiger appears to partake of divinity. ➔

The aforementioned creature is one of the animals in the Pondicherry zoo. Named Richard Parker in a clerical error after the hunter who captured him, he is a magnificent yet terrifying and inscrutable beast – representing perhaps the Universal Other or, if you prefer, the mystery at the heart of all human life. When Pi tries to connect with him by visiting his cage, his father decides to teach him a lesson in the cruel indifference of nature by placing a live goat inside. This lesson will later be put to the test.

Just when Pi, now 16 and brilliantly played by Suraj Sharma, is becoming interested in girls, his father decides to move to Canada, where he will sell some of the animals and start a new business. The family and some of the menagerie board a Japanese cargo ship in the Philippines, but this passage from India meets tragedy in a storm above the Mariana Trench, when there is apparently an explosion on board and – in a scene as graphic as any in the history of cinema – the ship sinks. Pi is the only human survivor, and he is joined in a lifeboat by an injured zebra, a frenzied hyena, a lumbering orangutan, and Richard Parker. The hyena eats the zebra, kills the orangutan and in turn is eaten by the tiger. Soon only Pi and Richard Parker are left to act out a tense storm and fang drama in the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean.

The face-off between the two lasts an hour on screen, and is perhaps a bit too long, but it allows director Ang Lee to stage one of the greatest shows on earth as we witness, inter alia, breaching whales encrusted in bioluminescent plankton that litter the water like stars, flying fish that whiz through the air like tracer bullets, an underwater world of illuminated jellyfish and a carnivorous island inhabited only by a multitudinous mob of meerkats. If this ravishing visual feast, heightened in 3D viewing, is meant as a homage to the miracle of creation, it pays tribute to human, not divine, invention. As Richard Dawkins argues, reality itself is magical and we see too that Lee's art adds a further layer of enchantment. What need, therefore, of a god? So, if anything, *Life of Pi* argues the exact opposite of what it intends.

And what of the Pi-Parker relationship? Initially, it looks like curtains for the youth, but gradually he learns to 'tame' the tiger like a circus-master with a whistle and a stick and keep it fed with fish and other sea food. At one point, he even saves it from drowning, for he comes to realise that the struggle with Richard Parker is giving him the will to survive. It even 'saves' him from becoming more like the animal himself. Again, we are presumably intended to believe that the tiger performs some sort of mystical role – that perhaps by absorbing the beast in man to itself, it enables Pi to retain his humanity.

After 227 days at sea (surely no coincidence that the figure of 'pi' is often written as 22/7), the lifeboat washes ashore on a Mexican beach. The tiger wanders off into the jungle, without so much as a parting purr or a grudging growl, and this devastates Pi whose attempt to connect with the beast has ultimately failed. If Richard Parker symbolises one face of an inscrutable god who moves in mysterious, tigerish, ways, then we are a long way off the god of love that the boy sought back home in India.

Pi is found and taken to hospital, where he is interviewed by two officials of the Japanese Ministry of Transport investigating the sinking of the freighter. They do not believe his account of the story, so he tells them a more realistic version involving only humans. Pi now claims that

he was joined in the lifeboat by his mother (the orangutan), the ship's cruel cook (the hyena), and an injured crewman (the zebra). Pi himself is of course the tiger in the first story. The cook kills and eats the sailor, and then kills the mother, whereupon Pi kills him. The officials, and the viewer, are left to decide which story they prefer.

Yet the whole thrust of the work is to encourage us to see the animal story as 'better'. After all, it is the gist of the drama and is inevitably less unpleasant (humans eating one another is more 'sinister' than animals doing it) and more colourful. Yes, the human version makes more sense, both logically and psychologically; but 'flat' reason is not on the agenda here. We are meant to have faith and believe in the mystery and the miracles.

Again, however, *Life of Pi* is theologically and philosophically shallow. I remember as a boy at Sunday school being told by the teacher his version of Pascal's wager that the religious believer can't lose because if he's right he will go to heaven, and if he's wrong then it doesn't matter anyway. I came away feeling that there was something wrong with this logic, and eventually I was able to articulate that it was not a good reason for believing anything. Francis Bacon lamented a weak tendency in humans: "For what a man would like to be true, that he more readily believes". He wanted people instead to believe an idea only if they thought it was true. On this criterion, the animal version falls down. It may be a 'better' story, but that does not make it more worthy of credulity.

We should note that in both accounts Pi loses his mother, father and brother at sea, and we have to ask why

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a good god would sink a ship full of innocent people and animals. And does it make a story morally better or worse that animals on the lifeboat eat one another or that humans cannibalise one another? Animal suffering, whether at the hands of humans or other animals, is

as much a disproof of a benevolent god as man's inhumanity to man.

Watching *Life of Pi*, you might easily forget that wars have been fought and enemies slaughtered, women abused, sexual minorities oppressed, scientists and writers tortured, imprisoned and killed – all in the name of someone's god. Religion certainly has its dark side, but in the movie the cruelty is sanitised: we do not see Pi's family drowning, nor the hyena or tiger tearing the other animals apart, and we are even spared the bodies of the dead fish.

J.G. Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, describes myths as 'mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of human life or of external nature'. Francis Bacon in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609) more generously treats myths as non-discursive forms of teaching, which lead 'the understanding of man by an easy and gentle passage through all novel and abstruse inventions which any way differ from common received opinions'. In other words, myths are human inventions designed as *illustrations* of ideas, not as *proofs* of reality. The whole notion behind *Life of Pi* is really a nonsense. To imply that a parable explains the universe 'better' than science and reason is to revert to a more primitive mode of understanding the world before knowledge and language evolved.

Watch the film and enjoy its triumphant artifice – the mostly cgi-generated tiger is truly awesome. Enjoy too the magic of reality that it beautifully captures. But take its theological pretensions with a large cellar of salt. Here it really is a case of north American pi in the sky. □